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ABSTRACT

There has been a dearth of First Nations people teaching First Nations Studies programs across Canada. This means that Native students must learn their history and contemporary academic knowledge from those who are non-Native in ethnicity and background and whose knowledge has been learned in schools instead of lived. It is time that First Nations people learn about their own history and knowledge from those who are actually part of the culture and have lived the life of a First Nations person. A glass ceiling exists for up and coming Native academics and teachers, a ceiling caused by union protocol and rules, an old-boys club mentality, "promotion from within, first" conventions, and academic elitism. This results in a lack of important First Nations role models at the postsecondary level, a lack of understanding regarding First Nations issues and protocol often bordering on the reprehensible, a lack of cultural sensitivity, and a closed-off ivory tower that is virtually unassailable to qualified First Nations people who could make a tremendous difference with their great knowledge and experiences. Recommendations include negotiating with unions to ensure that people presently on the outside of an institution would be hired for certain "specialized" positions; hiring First Nations workers with master's degrees and allowing them to complete their doctoral studies; and adopting policies of accepting only First Nations candidates for certain faculty positions. (TD)

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# The Key And The Coveted: An Exposé On The Lack Of First Nations Representation In First Nations Studies Programs At The College And University Level

By
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May 2002

**Note: This paper was presented at the 2002 CINSA conference in Toronto, Canada. It has also been approved for publication later this year (2003) in the acclaimed academic journal, <u>The Canadian Journal Of Native Studies</u>.**

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## Abstract

There has been a dearth of First Nations people teaching in First Nations Studies programs across Canada. It seems that First Nations students have been forced to learn their history and contemporary academic knowledge from those who are non-First Nations in ethnicity and background and whose knowledge has been learned in schools instead of lived. It is time that First Nations people were able to learn about their own history and knowledge from those who are actually part of the culture and who have actually lived the life of a First Nations person in this country. Up to now it appears that a glass ceiling has existed for up and coming First Nations academics and teachers, a ceiling caused by union protocol and rules, an old boys club mentality, "promotion from within, first" conventions, and ivory tower academic elitism. The results? A dearth of important First Nations role models at the post secondary level, a lack of understanding regarding First Nations issues and protocol often bordering on the reprehensible , an existing lack of cultural sensitivity, and a closed off ivory tower that is virtually unassailable to qualified First Nations people who could be making a tremendous difference in the field with their great knowledge and experiences.

William G. Lindsay, a status member of the Assiniboine First Nation and an Assistant Professor in First Nations Studies at the Institute of Indigenous Government in Vancouver, British Columbia, would like to present this academic paper which details the nuances of this issue: why the current situation exists, what detriments have resulted for First Nations students, what experiences have some First Nations students had because of the existing situation, and what some are doing to fix this most interesting conundrum.

**Biography:**

William G. Lindsay is an assistant professor at the Institute of Indigenous Government in Vancouver, British Columbia. IIG is Canada's first autonomous, Indigenous-controlled, public, accredited, post secondary institution. William teaches First Nations Studies and was instrumental in establishing a recent partnership between IIG's First Nations Studies program and the University of British Columbia's new First Nations Studies program.

William is a status member of the Assiniboine First Nation. He has two degrees from the University of British Columbia, a B.Ed. and a M.A. in History. He has been working in the field of post secondary education for six years, at the Native Education Centre, Douglas College, and the Institute of Indigenous Government (all located In Vancouver's lower mainland). William has appeared on numerous television and radio programs to discuss First Nations issues, including First Story, CBC Radio, and the Aboriginal Peoples Television Network. William has also had some minor written works published in western Canadian Aboriginal newspapers and recently had an Aboriginal children's short story book approved for publication.

**Note:** Within this paper are experiences, some unpleasant, regarding what has gone on in some of British Columbia's colleges and universities. These institutions will go unnamed in the interests of professional tact and respect. It is hoped that the lessons will be found in the experiences themselves.

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Newly into his career as post secondary educator and aspiring academic, this writer had the chance to attend a large conference of other First Nations Studies professionals. The conference was great as a way to network and hear of current research in the field. However, halfway through the first day of the conference a nagging question hung around the mind of this First Nations individual: "Where are all the brown faces?" A rough head count revealed that out of approximately eighty First Nations Studies educators, possibly eight were of distinct and obvious First Nations heritage. That meant that if this particular conference was any indicator, than only ten percent of people teaching in First Nations Studies programs were actually First Nations people; and if that was any indicator, how many First Nations people were teaching and doing research in other academic fields? One percent, or even less perhaps? Questions posed to some of the attendees of this particular conference revealed that, no it wasn't that First Nations people from representative institutions were not there; the fact was that in most of these institutions there were no First Nations faculty.

Having personally worked in the field of First Nations Studies for a few years longer now, this First Nations instructor through networking, job hunting, employment experiences, and conference attendance, has found that this situation may have improved but only marginally so. It has taken courage and foresight for some institutions to go about taking the necessary measures to rectify this situation, while others are content to follow the status quo. This paper will briefly explore what the situation has been like for First Nations people, who have often been left on the outside looking in through the glass walls of the house of academia. The results to students, First Nations and

non, will be briefly touched on and, finally, what needs to be done to improve the situation and the beneficial results derived from such action, will be expounded upon.

To be an aspiring First Nations academic and post secondary instructor is often an exercise whose name is frustration. To watch or hear of non-First Nations people attaining key and coveted First Nations Studies academic positions is a painful experience for Aboriginal people, on an individual basis and as a collective entity. We, as First Nations people, have gotten used to major universities and colleges setting up programs to investigate and explore (or poke and prod, depending on one's point of view) our culture and heritage. But to watch these programs hire non-First Nations people to be the main researchers and teachers of this knowledge, while utilizing Aboriginal knowledge and experience in a peripheral way, is a troubling and hurtful experience to the First Nations community. Make no mistake, the local Aboriginal community is very well aware of what goes on in these programs, with the moccasin telegraph vibrating with such information as what kinds of courses are being offered and who was hired as faculty.

I used the word "peripheral" to describe how First Nations knowledge is often utilized in these programs. The following are three examples of this occurring in the British Columbia post secondary education system, examples which encapsulate this issue under discussion.

In the first instance, one of British Columbia's major post secondary institutions established a First Nations Studies program as part of its course/program offerings. Core faculty hired were non-Aboriginal, with First Nations expertise being relegated to peripheral advisory, part-time, or support

staff positions. The hiring of the core faculty followed a process many First Nations people in the business are familiar with: the hiring of non-Aboriginal people with doctoral degrees who had worked with or lived among First Nations people for segments of their lives. Such ones were valued for their credentials and for their experiences. Whether these experiences were by circumstance or by design did not seem to matter. I refer to this process as the "Man Called Horse" syndrome or, for younger readers, the "Dances With Wolves" phenomenon, whereby those who by chance or circumstance lived among and worked with First Nations people and achieved academic and professional acclaim for doing so, and were concomitantly recognized and hired by post secondary institutions for their acquired knowledge and attained expertise.

Imagine Hollywood coming out with "Dances With Wolves – Part Two". In this version, the protagonist Lt. Dunbar (played by an aging Kevin Costner) receives acclaim and notoriety for teaching Native American Studies at a big Ivy League 1800s school, based on his army credentials and his experience among the Sioux people. At the same time, the gifted holy man Kicking Bird (in a reprise performance by Graham Greene) is relegated to poverty and reservation life, teaching part-time at the local reserve school, whenever the local white school marm requires some knowledge on local plants or on what life was like when the plains swarmed with buffalo. Consider, too, that Kicking Bird may have even attained a masters degree in Native American Studies, yet is still continually passed over for academic positions because thousands of men like Dunbar already are in place in the system, ready and eager to hire other Dunbars. This in a roundabout and

satirical way, puts into metaphor the academic hiring process that many modern institutions follow. While this may seem like a normal and fair process to the powers that be, let it be known that First Nations communities and students who these institutions purport to be reaching out to, think differently. They would treasure to see their own people, teaching their own history and culture. To quote acclaimed Black film director Spike Lee (commenting on similar problems in the United States among the Black constituency): "I'm tired of other people documenting our history." Ironically, this paper's author made almost a word-for-word similar statement years ago at his first First Nations Studies academic conference, when he stated at the beginning of his presentation that, "We are tired of others teaching us our history." Spike Lee made the landmark film on Black anger, Do The Right Thing. This writer is presenting this paper.

The second example to be referred to involves an acclaimed college in the Vancouver area. They also went to great pains to establish an Aboriginal Studies program. As word leaked out about this undertaking, the local Aboriginal community's attitude was wait-and-see. The worst of fears was realized when it became known that initial hiring for the new program was a call for those willing to share their Aboriginal knowledge and expertise to set up the initial core courses. However, according to union dictates these finished courses would then have to be opened up internally to already-in-place staff. It was no secret that there were no First Nations people on the faculty roster at this time. This realistically meant that First Nations people and their knowledge would be used to set up the courses, only to have the teaching of them be done by others who were non-Aboriginal. The local First

Nations academic community was outraged as word of this got around. It was like a slap in the face to the very community this college was purporting to reach out to. To give credit where credit is due, however, this college after some experiments with non-Aboriginal faculty in the program, has taken things in a new direction and currently employs some First Nations teaching faculty.

The third example to be looked at involves another Vancouver area college which likes to advertise its links to local First Nations people. In fact, this particular college has borrowed its name from a local First Nations group. In addition, it hired a local First Nations artist to construct a First Nations oriented school logo. However, this college follows the usual pattern and seemingly has great difficulty finding First Nations faculty to actually do some of the teaching. In fact, in personal conversations with the college president, this researcher was able to squeeze out of him the name of only one First Nations person who was in the employ of this large post secondary institution. It was subsequently learned, however, that this individual of whom the college president was speaking so proudly as a representative of the First Peoples of Canada, actually did not grow up in the culture that she was purportedly representing. She had, in fact, been adopted as a baby into a non-Aboriginal home and thus grew up receiving all of the perks and benefits of that home and of the dominant society of which it was a part. Yes, she was First Nation by virtue of her blood-line, but by virtue of her culture – her upbringing, her ethos, her world-view – she was not.

This is another example of what sometimes occurs in the academic world: "First Nations" people are hired who are so on the outside (and are

more than willing to flog this during job interviews) but are not on the inside. Such ones, never having grown up experiencing all of the trials and tribulations of being an Aboriginal person in this country, learn their knowledge from books like others and are thus value-less in their positions to the First Nations community because they often never self-identify themselves as Aboriginal once in these positions. They now want to play it safe.

Institutions in making these kinds of choices, too, play it safe. They are then able to point to their "First Nations" staff and utilize them without having to deal with the cultural or political baggage which might come with the "real deal". This is a problem in some institutions. If ones like those mentioned above do not self-identify, then who is there to really speak out for First Nations students and for First Nations issues? Those who do speak out end up being few and far between in many institutions and end up being over-worked, by being expected to represent the Aboriginal voice to the public and on the plethora of never-ending college and university committees. Not only that, but because such lone voices often have to speak out forcefully regarding Aboriginal matters, they can end up being branded as radicals or as trouble-makers. The pressure to keep quiet, or worse to quietly acquiesce on matters becomes tremendous. Numerous individuals interviewed for this paper concurred with this occurring.

It can thus be seen why it is so important to have First Nations people in the college and university system who do more than just be the "Indian in the cupboard", to quote a First Nations colleague. These are the ones who

will really go to bat for First Nations students because they, literally, have "walked a mile in their [student] moccasins."

People may wonder what other differences it would make, and does make, having First Nations people as core faculty in the college and university system. The prime reasons deal with issues of credibility and role modelling. If students take a course and the appropriate role model is there when it is called for, this adds instant credibility and legitimacy to what is being taught. Imagine a Chinese person teaching Chinese Studies, a Black person teaching Black history, a woman teaching Women's Studies or issues of feminism, then imagine otherwise. One quickly envisions the value and credibility associated with having a First Nations person teaching First Nations Studies.

Taking this a step further, imagine the varied backgrounds that many First Nations students come from. In my experience, personal and professional, First Nations students often come from backgrounds associated with reservation life and concomitant poverty and social problems; from backgrounds where dealing with discrimination and racism were daily events; from backgrounds where dealings with education systems were dubious experiences at best; and from situations where the lack of role models was the norm and not the exception. Considering all of these things, imagine how important it would be to have someone teaching you in a college and university classroom who is also from that background, and who has made a professional and personal success of their life. What a tremendous difference such a person could make in the lives of others. To understand the legitimacy and power such an individual would have by his

very presence, I quote Alexander Solzhenitsyn: "He brought with him, too, that passionate sense of conviction which inspires belief less by its veracity than by its origin in personal suffering. He spoke with the special insight of one who had witnessed ..." (from August 1914). Do not underestimate the power of role models. Attrition rates for First Nations students at all levels of education are very high. Could it not be that the lack of role models at all levels in the system contributes to this? It is the sincere belief of many that the addition of First Nations faculty at the post secondary level would assist in the reversal of current trends regarding Aboriginal drop-out rates. Such faculty could speak from knowledge gained, not from books alone, but from the experience of life. Their personal insights and special understanding could be used to assist First Nations students in their education process, especially during times of great stress. When numerous family tragedies and funerals, family difficulties, issues of addiction, and financial conundrums occur, to name some examples, experienced First Nations faculty and staff can provide words of comfort and advice, words that have been forged in the personal crucible of life. Having this listening and understanding ear can often make or break a First Nations student's academic sojourn. As a personal example, one of my students this past year had serious drug addiction issues which kept interfering with his college education. However, he felt he could approach his main instructor (myself) without fear or apprehension, and be honest about his problems. This instructor knew exactly where this student was coming from, having "walked a mile in his moccasins" as a young man, and was able to give the appropriate measurements of advice and listening ear. The student finished out the year

with good grades and plans to return in September. He is also continuing with ongoing addiction treatment counselling.

Contrast this experience with others that First Nations students have had with culturally insensitive instructors. Impatience and lack of sympathy or understanding have been the hallmarks of such student experience. One non-Aboriginal instructor dealing with an Aboriginal student who unfortunately had had to leave a succession of classes to attend a succession of funerals (as often occurs in Aboriginal communities), accused the student of "making a career out of attending funerals." No First Nations faculty member who truly knows what it is like to live in an Aboriginal community would ever say such a thing. It should be added that this instructor had worked in Aboriginal communities his whole life. He may have had the "Dances With Wolves" background mentioned earlier in this paper but his "heart" condition was revealed in his attitude and conduct.

The point of the above is this: First Nations students often face special difficulties, and these can be mitigated by having an understanding and positive role model, who will go the extra mile to help them salvage courses (and maybe whole terms) during difficult times; and the reason that they will go that extra distance is because chances are they have stood in the student's shoes and nothing beats experience and concomitant compassion.

Having non-Aboriginal faculty teaching First Nations Studies courses and programs almost invariably leads to other special problems and conflicts. The following experiences are not meant to colour all such faculty with the same brush, but they do show how special problems sometimes erupt in a unique and sometimes volatile First Nations issues-oriented environment.

One instructor in one such program at a Vancouver area college exhibited such racist language and tendencies that the First Nations students affected by this behavior circulated a petition against her being in the classroom. This instructor's job was saved by union intervention (she had thirty years plus experience teaching in the college). This episode serves as a warning against promoting someone from within an institution to teach First Nations Studies, just because they happen to have a union saying this must be so.

At another college in the Vancouver area, the word "squaw" was repeatedly used in a class presentation by a non-Aboriginal instructor, who did so in a sudden and flippant manner. First Nations women attending the class were horrified, embarrassed, and angry. After being approached by a student delegation regarding the matter, the instructor tried at first to minimize the incident but eventually relented and apologized. No First Nations instructor would have ever used the word "squaw" or other such offensive word, without much advance preparation, explanation, and historical context being provided.

This researcher has faced many such uncomfortable situations in his life as student and academic. Other respected academics with doctoral degrees and with years of experience working with or around First Nations people using such words and phrases as "drunk all the time", "idiot", "you Indians", and a personal favorite, "you people". The first three phrases, as examples, are burned on my mind and memory for all time because of how they were used, where they were used, and by whom. The last phrase, "you people", is a personal favorite because it encapsulates one of the key

problems referred to in this paper: that of institutions hiring "qualified" non-Aboriginal people to teach about First Nations issues; yet in their heart and in their conversation they reveal who they really are and whose side they relate to – it is thus "you people", not "we" when discussing serious First Nations issues.

What can thus be done to alleviate this situation? Obviously, Canadian colleges and universities need to put a priority on the hiring of First Nations people to instruct in First Nations Studies programs. This would mean negotiating with unions or "working around" usual union protocols to ensure that people presently on the outside of an institution would be hired for certain "specialized" faculty positions, as First Nations Studies faculty should be designated. The folly of hiring from within just because certain individuals may have had the advantage of extra years in a union or extra years learning about another's culture and history from books, has already been noted in this paper.

A priority thus needs to be put on First Nations knowledge and life experience. If the field involves First Nations Studies, should not a First Nations person with an appropriate masters degree be worth as much as a non-Aboriginal person with a Ph.D.? If colleges and universities agree with this, and they should since so few First Nations people actually have had a chance to complete a doctoral degree, perhaps good First Nations workers with masters degrees can be hired with the intent of providing them with the necessary time and direction to complete doctoral studies (a work/study format, if you will). This would be an infinitely superior option to what is currently happening.

Canada currently has certain immigration policies in place to give first priority of jobs to those who are actually Canadian. The federal government affirms a "Canadian first" hiring policy. The reason for this is obvious: imagine if Canadian expertise were competing for academic positions with American expertise. Canadian résumés would get buried under an avalanche of American résumés because the United States has ten times Canada's population, ten times its workforce, and ten times its expertise and background of wealth. Current immigration rules thus protect the integrity of the Canadian worker and system. Imagine what the situation would be like if no such priorities were in place.

So it is with First Nations academics and teachers. They end up buried under an academic avalanche in Canada. Only in this case, Canadian Aboriginal people are outnumbered at a rate approaching thirty to one, with the vast majority of these non-Aboriginal Canadians having had vastly superior educational and work experience opportunities. Canadian universities and colleges thus need to take this uneven situation into account, as the Canadian government does in protecting Canadian jobs, and put a real priority on putting First Nations people into key and coveted First Nations Studies faculty positions. The Institute Of Indigenous Government in Vancouver, learning from past mistakes, does this; the University Of British Columbia does this, by canvassing and seeking out qualified First Nations people; and the University of Victoria does this, by openly advertising for First Nations candidates only for certain faculty positions, and by willing to accept in principle those who may only have masters degrees at the time.

The result of such action would benefit all concerned: First Nations students would have understanding role models to emulate; hungry and enthusiastic First Nations academics would be able to share their cornucopia of cultural knowledge and life's experiences with others; First Nations communities would feel more in tune with academic institutions which purport to reach out to them; post secondary institutions would be able to move further away from the old ivory tower models which were once the exclusive domain of white, male, upper-middle class elites; and non-Aboriginal student bodies would benefit from an education received from the real First Nations Studies experts, those whose hearts, minds, life experiences, and very souls are in synchronicity with the subject they teach. This writer thus looks forward to the day when he will attend a First Nations Studies academic conference and will no longer have to ask the question, "Where are all the brown faces?"

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